



Pitts, F. H. (2015). Normalisation, exclusion, commensuration: work, economics and the possibilities of political economy. *Enquire*, 7(1), 1-12. <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/sociology/documents/enquire/vol-7-issue-1-pitts.pdf>

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Normalisation, exclusion, commensuration: work, economics and the possibilities of political economy

Enquire 7(1)

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Abstract

This paper discusses the means by which work is normalised, some of the manifestations of its normalisation, and the possibilities for the denormalisation of work provided by the renewal of 'political' economy. It suggests that normality is not a static, fixed status which attaches itself permanently to a given social practice or phenomenon, but is subject to a process, constantly in movement and in need of reinforcement. This process is what we might call 'normalisation'. Normality is attained by means of normalisation not only in policy or popular ideology, but moreover in academic representations of the world. Academic representations do not simply reflect an external social reality, but are part of it. This paper asks what is left out in economic accounts of work, and what is missing when stock is taken only of numbers. It is suggested that political economy politicises that which the economic reason of pure economics, which has superseded it hegemonically, obfuscates. Work is central among those social phenomena that economics helps reduce to abstract, quantitative residues of what are in fact more complex networks of social relations, disciplining procedures, and modes of resistance. This paper suggests that the 'normality' that work possesses in capitalist society can be challenged by making these qualitative aspects 'public', making apparent the essential uncertainty underlying work in the context of a society moving away from it, and exposing the irreconcilable demands and desires on which its unsteady normality teeters, confronting the smooth quantitative space of economics with that which it fears most: difference, heterogeneity, incommensurability. By making these aspects public, they are rendered political and thus subject to critique. The critique and repoliticising of work opens up the opportunity of its ideological contestation and, ultimately, the possibility of its overcoming.

This paper suggests that normality is subject to the process of normalisation. Normality is not a static, fixed status which attaches itself permanently to a given social practice or phenomenon, but is subject to a process, constantly in movement and in need of reinforcement. This process is what we might call 'normalisation'. This relies upon the exclusion of that which threatens the sense of normality: uncertainty, contingency, conflict. In this, normalisation goes hand-in-hand with the tendency towards the commensuration of all things, upon which capitalism as a system of exchange depends.

The paradigmatic example of the literature through which the role of exclusion has been conceptualised, principally with reference to the question of discipline, is the oeuvre of Michel Foucault (see 2001). Exclusion, of course, helps guarantee normality in far more direct, brutal and corporeal ways than I have given it credit for. The normalisation of work witnesses and relies upon the exclusion of the unemployed, and those who pursue alternative relationships to employment. Behaviours, identities and creative impulses that cannot be rendered homogeneous, comparable and quantifiable are expelled from the system. Representing all the irreconcilability and awkwardness the process of normalisation seeks to overcome, individuals endowed with these characteristics are barred from comfortable material standards of living. The processes of normalisation, exclusion and commensuration that I look at here are of a piece with this pernicious practice.

The world of work and its study provides an exemplary forum for the interrogation of processes of normalisation, commensuration and exclusion. This paper contends that normality is attained by means of normalisation not only in policy or popular ideology, but moreover in academic representations of the world. Academic representations contribute to the process of normalisation. They too are subject to the complementary processes of exclusion and commensuration. The root of the word all too present, academic 'disciplines' structure the production of knowledge, excluding that which is open to contingency, contestation and uncertainty for that which codifies the mess of experience in recognisable, predictable, commensurable ways. 'Disciplined' in such a manner, along the lines of exclusion and commensuration, the hegemonic forms taken by intellectual inquiry within the capitalist academy pose little threat to smooth continuum of normality. Indeed, they assist in its assembling, and help maintain its continuity. Academic representations, such as that of economics, do not simply reflect an external social reality, but are part of it. But they can also be part of its undoing. This paper asks questions towards this end, with a specific focus on economics and the topic of work, and the ways in which the former excludes

that which is uncertain in order to guarantee capitalist commensuration and consequently ensure the reproduction of normality. What is left out in economic accounts of work? What is missing when stock is taken only of numbers? It is suggested that political economy answers these questions by making public categories of quality, difference, heterogeneity and incommensurability. By rendering what is economic properly political, the power, domination and subordination that circumscribes the 'normal' can be exposed. Political economy thereby exposes work's contingency, contestability, and, most importantly, the potential for it to be radically altered or abolished.

Suggesting that the critique of the normality of work is a contemporary necessity with urgent relevance for current policy and public discourse, this paper discusses the means by which work is normalised, some of the manifestations of its normalisation, and the possibilities for the denormalisation of work provided by the renewal of 'political' economy, as opposed to pure economics, which can be seen to have largely superseded it hegemonically. It is suggested that political economy politicises that which the economic reason of economics obfuscates. Work is central among those social phenomena that economics helps reduce to abstract, quantitative residues of what are in fact more complex networks of social relations, disciplining procedures, and modes of resistance. The 'normality' that work possesses in capitalist society can be challenged by making these qualitative aspects 'public', making apparent the essential uncertainty underlying work in the context of a society moving away from it, and exposing the irreconcilable demands and desires on which its unsteady normality teeters, confronting the smooth quantitative space of economics with that which it fears most: difference, heterogeneity, incommensurability. By making these aspects public, they are rendered political and thus subject to critique. The critique and repoliticising of work opens up the opportunity of its ideological contestation and, ultimately, the possibility of its overcoming.

In spite of a rapidly disintegrating material and social basis for its normality, evident in the large and lasting levels of unemployment witnessed in Western economies and accelerated by the possibilities of automation, work is arguably the most normalised aspect of capitalist society¹. The

¹It is not simply that the standards of the present time undermine work's normalness. Denning (2010) suggests the wageless life precedes the waged life of work, both chronologically and, arguably, in its social centrality. That it is traditionally seen as in some way inhabiting a lack is based in the dominance of the capitalist labour relationship. The example of the primacy of wageless life communicates that work is normalised in spite not only of prevailing contemporary trends towards its end, but also in spite of its jarring historicity. Indeed, it was only with the industrial revolution that widespread, organised, rigorously timed work became a fact of life for most members of the population (Thompson 1967)

context of widespread unemployment and the increasing expulsion of workers from production by technological advances only makes more urgent and pressing the need for a concerted project of the denormalisation of work that can keep up with and quicken the pace of emergent possibilities for ways of living without or after work. This is, of course, a process which material and social circumstances are achieving themselves. However, in defiance of these underlying historical circumstances, claims as to the normality of work are maintained on a predominantly ideological territory. Work is, of course, empirically 'normal', whether or not we are moving towards a society in which the practical doing of it is no longer sustainable or realisable on a mass level. However, the suggestion of this paper is that it is at the level of ideas that the normality and processes of normalisation of work that give rise to this normality can be challenged. This critique of ideas requires a resurrection of the tradition of properly 'political' economy and its critique, at the expense of the formal discipline of 'economics' that has largely superseded it.

The assessment of this paper is that a political economic project of denormalisation is needed to render unstable the everyday status that work possesses in capitalist society. This requires an attack on economics from the direction of a fully political economy with sufficient critical abilities to destroy the givenness, naturalness and normality of work, and make apparent the degree to which it is contingent, contested and, most importantly, capable of being overcome.

As Marazzi reminds us, political economy preceded economics. Classical political economists such as Adam Smith highlighted the conundrums that arose from a system in which gain is made by one person from the transaction of apparently equivalent commodities at the expense of another. For some political economists, the 'surplus' that remained highlighted a gap between hours worked and hours paid, for instance. This inequality functioned on the basis of social relations of power and domination which could only be studied from the perspective of a political economy. The two, in fact- politics and economy- were not seen as distinct and separable parts. This changed, however, as the rise of economics as a science cleansed itself of any traces of the incommensurable, immeasurable and non-equivalent. In this way economics may be seen as both the handmaiden as well as the hagiographer of capitalist society. As an academic representation it is a part of the society it seeks to describe, with this description serving to extend and complete tendencies already present within the latter.

Today we face a general crisis of economics and economic thinking, allied to a crisis of the global economic system which mainstream economists failed to pre-empt, subsequently hamstrung in their attempts to move beyond

the moribund thinking to which both the crisis and their initial inability to see what was afoot can be attributed. Therefore, to return to a critical, political economy is both a contemporary and necessary step. From within the discipline of political economy itself have arisen calls for such a step, oriented around solving the current absence of work among its international and global currents. It may be said that this absence bears the influence of the present conjuncture. The ongoing crisis of capitalism is one of considerable scale. Its roots and ramifications are typically seen to consist in the faraway stuff of complex financial flows and the grand gestures of national and international governmental bodies. The scale of the crisis, and the generalised deficit in both the popular and academic grasp of the full implications of a financialised global economy, have attracted a specific response on the part of economics, political economy and their cognate fields. Entirely understandably perhaps, in the wake of the crisis, economic and political-economic enquiry has directed itself towards matters both of the macro and of the mighty. However, this focus is exerted at the risk of squeezing out the study of the roots and ramifications of the crisis in the stuff of everyday normality. Not least of which among these more 'micro' concerns is that of work.

The intellectual apparatus of political economy was established on the foundation of a close attention to the role of work, often in its more quotidian complexions. However, international and global strands of political economy have for some time struggled to include work within their purview, according to Phoebe Moore (2012), who highlights the paucity of scholarship on work and employment within International Political Economy. Despite the origins of political economy resting in the study of work and labour, Moore implies that international and global strands of this tradition have lost sight of this heritage (*ibid.*, p. 217). This, perhaps, has something to do with the hegemonic supersession of political economy by its progeny, economics, and the particular problematic rationales the latter has exerted upon the social material of its study. Economics fails to adequately represent qualitative, banal, eccentric aspects that do not reduce easily to entries on a balance sheet of hours or productivity.

Although arriving from outside the disciplinary apparatus that constitutes the modern-day intellectual tradition of political economy, the recent publication of Kathi Weeks's *The Problem with Work* (2011) serves as a helpful corrective to this steady drift away from the study of employment. Its principal purpose is as a clarion call for a utopian politics of anti-work. However, alongside the sketched details of a possible future, the book concurrently entertains the equally radical prospect of a return. This return is to the denormalising, denaturalising critique of work that is present in early political economy but largely missing in the contemporary context of the

hegemony of quantitative economics. Merely to speak of work, Weeks suggests, achieves this return to a critical idiom that carries with it enormous and destructive potential.

Weeks's call for a return to the critique of work complements calls within the domain of radical theory for a return to a fully critical political economy capable of denaturalising the most obvious and normalised manifestations of capitalist labour. In his recently translated *Capital and Affects* (2011), the theorist Christian Marazzi gives an illustration of what a properly political economy can achieve when applied to the world of work. Marazzi provides a good example of how such a critique of economics by means of political economy is effective in shedding light upon the cultural, political and social constitution of the economic categories which seemingly govern our everyday lives. Drawing upon the example of women's work in the domestic sphere, Marazzi identifies the woman worker's awareness of the 'place for the socks' as an instance both of a kind of individual, uncertified knowledge based around specific emotional and cognitive sensibilities and a collective social practice determined by a system of oppressive power relations established on the grounds of gender (2011, pp. 79-81).

The point is that plain economics fails to adequately represent either of these aspects. Whereas we think of work as rigorously timed, recompensed and measured, the work performed in the home (predominantly by women) escapes this rationale. Even if it were to be timed the same as the formal labour that takes place in the workplace, it would likely still display a cognitive and emotional intensity that there would be no easy way to capture using the quantitative measures of traditional economics.

Indeed, this intensity arises not just from the cumulative building of specialist skills and knowledge as one moves up through pay-grades and training schemes, such as in the formal world of work. Rather, the intensity and the tasks performed are determined by a societal system of power relations between genders and gender roles. This, for Marazzi, is summed up in the 'place for the socks', a type of qualitative judgement of where something belongs that cannot be totted up on a balance sheet of hours or productivity. What economics does is squeeze out these qualitative idiosyncrasies from its analysis in favour of the cold, hard stuff of quantitative measurement and standardisation. The qualitative aspects that underlie Marazzi's 'place for the socks' are the same social and political issues which may help to explain that which economics chooses not to (ibid., pp. 79-81).

It is important to note here that Marazzi uses women's work in the domestic sphere in an instrumental way as an example of something broader. From the largely illustrative example of the mother's knowledge of the 'place

for the socks', Marazzi draws important conclusions with wider purchase. Of course, it must be stated that much more can be said about specifically gendered work and its wider importance as a vital issue in debates around work and its (de)normalisation. But here I focus only on the expanded point that Marazzi is making, without wishing to relegate the gendered context of the example to any secondary order of significance.

The critique of economics is a critique of the economic reason that abstracts from and quantifies work, stealing from it its reference to a set of concrete practices suffused with an essentially qualitative set of social relations that determine the conditions, extent and results of the labour in question, and over which there is considerable contestation and struggle elided by an economic-rational approach. By means of the critique of this, it is proposed, we can commence the critique of the acquired normality of work, its givenness and seemingly natural status in capitalist society. By criticising the appearances that it assumes in large and abstract aggregations, we can open up the critical space to scrutinise its concrete and qualitative dimensions.

The classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo at least bore the considerable merit of having exhibited a questioning curiosity with regards to work and its position and function in capitalist society. However, it is perhaps not so much to classical political economy that this critical 'return' should deliver us, but to the critique of political economy of Marx. This critique can properly be considered a continuation and completion of classical political economy, rather than an opposing force to it per se. It is precisely this observation that suggests Marx's critique to be both a template for what can more accurately be called a 'critical political economy' and something to be overcome in the attempt to establish this political economy of work. The denormalisation of work found its apotheosis in political economy's critique at the hands of Marx. By setting out in his purportedly 'objective', 'scientific' style the contemporary specificity and position that work takes in capitalist society, Marx too spoke of work only to make it, by means of its having been spoken at all, seem unfamiliar and problematic. This is the essence of Marx's immanent critique of the categories of capitalist society. It is the pressing need for such a critical practice of reading and speaking the terms which society sets us that faces political economy.

However, even this is incomplete, and requires building upon in order to sharpen it against the society of work. It might be suggested that Marx's foundational critique of political economy carries with it some of the normalisations of the object of its ire. The critique is bound to the object through a conflicted relationship of opposition, whereby the immanent nature of this critique leads it to immerse itself in its terms so completely as to never

completely eschew them. The early thought of Jean Baudrillard is incisive on the relevancy of the normalisation of work in capitalist society, and the failure of Marx to completely break with this². He suggests that whilst Marx pursued a valuable endeavour in exposing and deconstructing the normalisation of homo economicus and the web of market relations in which it this fiction was implicated, the critical standpoint from which this denormalisation was conducted was that of labour itself. This attachment to labour owes itself in part, we might suggest, to the political expediencies of the time. By subverting production to a radical position vis-à-vis society and subordinating it to a dialectical picture of upheaval, Marx endowed production and labour with 'revolutionary title of nobility' that has paralysed subsequent attempts to formulate a political programme derived from Marx's concepts. Thus, one normalisation was substituted for another (Baudrillard 1973, pp. 18-19).

According to Poster, Baudrillard sees production and labour as the 'forms' which Marx used as a foundation for the critique of political economy. However, in so using these forms, a part of Marx's critique was left incomplete, carrying over entirely uncritically two key concepts of political economy itself. Poster asserts that the posing of need and use-value against exchange-value is another manifestation of where Marx, in attempting the critique of political economy, merely reflected it back at itself from a different angle. This leads Baudrillard to assert that Marx's critique only served to 'interiorize' and to 'complete' its object. It is suggested that one example of this interiorisation can be found in Marx's attack on abstract labour from the standpoint of concrete labour, which takes to the terrain of the very terms set by the old political economy and gives them renewed efficacy from a different perspective, whilst remaining squarely within the logic and presentation of labour as a part of capitalist (or indeed, any) society (Poster 1973, p. 2).

A renewed political economy of work that goes further than Marx in his critique and carries forward the template provided by Marazzi for a political economy of work can be seen as a force capable of challenging 'economic reason', as Gorz puts it (1989). Of course, Gorz sees economic rationality as something much wider than capitalism alone. Capitalism is an appearance of economic reason, rather than economic reason standing in a subservient relation to capitalism. In this paper, I have described the way in which commensuration, and the kinds of economic thinking that it calls into being, is necessary for the continuation and reproduction of the capitalist system. However, on a close reading of Gorz (see especially 1989 pp. 109-113 and 120-122) one could equally see capitalism as arising from other independent and pre-existing tendencies towards the commensuration of all things in a

²This discussion of Baudrillard draws in part on a short piece published on the website of the journal *Telos* (see Pitts 2013)

sphere of pure quantity. There is a potentially very rewarding debate to be had around the distinction between Gorz's approach and others, vis-a-vis economic reason and capitalism. For the purposes of this paper, I elide the question of origins.

Political economy endows the study of economics with a 'political' questioning of social and cultural categories and the determination they bear upon the economic. A renewal of the efficacy of political economy (and its critical form in Marx's immanent critique of political economy) lies precisely in its capacity to critique the terms of economics. Slavoj Žižek contends that political economy depends upon the active re-politicisation of economics. The economic is not an objective sphere completely separate from human intentions, actions and struggles, but rather one conditioned by culture, social relations and politics. One can see the 'depoliticization' of economics in the discipline to which it lends its name. Economic relations are presented as a simple 'servicing of the goods', rather than as an 'outcome' of these very social relations and cultural forms, a result of a 'political struggle' over the terms of what economics is and is for, and the contention over the adequacy of its conceptualisations to describe the world around us (Žižek 2010: 182-3).

Such a 'political' critique of economics and its fetishization of the measurable, the commensurable, the quantifiable and the equivalent will be enacted by means of a more direct critical reengagement with work and its qualitative aspects than that found in much contemporary scholarship. Through the close study of the processes whereby work is reduced to equal, homogeneous 'work' and comes to take a role in capitalist society through its quantification, points and features may be identified which throw economic reason into flux. In critiquing the way economics abstracts from the concrete incommensurability of life to construct measure, one might also critique the way in which capitalism performs the same manoeuvre. In so doing, the movements of economics are revealed to be those of capitalism. Furthermore, the opposition between the study of the 'macro' and the 'micro' is shown to be a false one: rather, insights about the functioning of global capitalism may be extrapolated from the simplest observations of the everyday status of work. From this basis, a critical analysis of economic reason through the critique of work chips away at some of most essential normalisations sustaining capitalist society.

One can extrapolate a more extensive picture of the operation of capitalism from the presentation of work in the everyday dimensions in which it appears to us. By giving representational form to the processes of quantification and commensuration by which work is categorised and made comparable to other instances of work, we can project a possible way by

which the critique of economic reason can be conducted in the name of a political economy of work. This political economy of work problematizes and 'repoliticises' economics, orienting itself towards the rescue of the qualitative, the non-equivalent and the immeasurable from economic reason's rationalising, standardising realm of quantity. The normalness of economics and the descriptions and justifications it offers of work are troubles by such an approach.

Ultimately, this demonstrates the important way in which the critique of work is an immanent one. The important project of the denormalisation of work relies upon its presentation in exactly the complexion that we find it today, in capitalist society. Merely to speak of work achieves this immanent critique. As Weeks suggests, in making work 'public' by naming it, one simultaneously renders it 'political' and opens it up for contestation (2011, p. 7). Its active politicisation combats those tendencies which would have us believe that work and the form it takes in our societies is in some way natural and given, and challenges the logic of quantification and commensuration that dominates the performance of labour, and of which economics partakes in as a moment of this process of abstraction. As Horkheimer puts it, 'critical' theorists are those who take society on its own terms, 'regard[ing] any other interpretation as pure idealism'. However, rather than representing the uncritical resignation to these terms, 'the critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life contains simultaneously their condemnation' (Horkheimer 1976 [1937], p. 219). For a critical political economy of work, the realisation of this dictum contains a wealth of resources. On the one hand, we have economics, which tends towards a representation of the status of work in society as cold, hard and unquestioned, an amorphous and quantitative mass to which jobs are added and subtracted. Economics here represents the society it is part of only by passive reflection, completing the abstractive procedures of the capitalist system of equivalent exchange by excluding the uncertainty and incommensurability that pose it its greatest threat. Political economy, however, represents this society by way of active critique, making it seem strange, contingent, contestable, and alive with possibilities of its overthrow. It voices the non-equivalent, irreconcilably heterogeneous content of desires, demands and struggles that threaten the normalisation of this thing so obvious and eternal- 'work'- and promise to disrupt the commensuration and exclusion upon which the reproduction of the current system depends.

Acknowledgements

This paper was written as part of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/J50015X/1). It constitutes an early component of a forthcoming PhD thesis. The paper has benefitted from the comments and engrossing discussion that followed the presentation of an earlier draft at the British International Studies Association's International Political Economy Group conference at the University of Leeds in September 2014, particularly this helped me think through some professional dimensions of this relationship as they pertain to the current situation in UK academia - although the richness of the suggestions and topics we covered then could not fully be reconciled into the format of this particular piece.

I am indebted to the two anonymous reviewers for their advice and encouragement. I owe them credit for encouraging me to link my work with exclusion, and the significance of unemployment and gender. This link draws upon ideas of the disciplining function of academic that in turn is derived from an understanding of the relationship between exclusion and discipline such as that expressed in the work of Foucault.

I am grateful to Nick Taylor for reminding me of the potential significance of Michael Denning's thinking about the 'wageless life' for my work.

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